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Yazoo Pump: Which names, numbers are correct?

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"There are three kinds of lies: damned lies and statistics." —Disraeli

ROLLING FORK — What's in a name? What's in a number? Perhaps a lot when it comes to the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project.

A never-released 1998 Mississippi State University study, using flooding data provided by the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, paints a significantly different picture of the project than the one the Corps put on display for public consumption two years later.

In May, 1998, the Stoneville-based advocacy group Delta Council commissioned MSU's Department of Agricultural Economics (along with the Miss. Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks) to conduct a "multi-disciplinary study to document consequences of flooding in the South Delta and to evaluate a plan to manage wetlands and control floodwaters." At that time it was proposed that South Delta floodwaters be released to manage water levels in winter months, as well as provide a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pump to evacuate excess backwater above 15 feet in elevation in the spring.

"Almost all of the hydrologic data was provided us by the Corps," said MSU professor Dr. Sean R. Sperlock, who headed up the effort. MSU was asked only

to consider flooding to lands, not people or their homes, as is now being emphasized.

According to sources, a draft of the report was completed in December, 1998, but its findings were objected to by Delta Council officials, who ordered it shelved in early 1999. No final version of the report was ever released.

"I'd say that's about right," Sperlock said last week, when asked to verify the accounts.

Sperlock said that the Corps provided MSU professors with an intricately detailed hydrologic simulation model of historical backwater flooding. According to the MSU draft report, a copy of which was obtained by the Deer Creek Pilot, that model was "capable of estimating flood stages at two locations (the Steele Bayou and Little Sunflower water control structures) on a daily basis over the period 1943-1997."

The report also says that the Corps provided MSU with a valuable gauge for determining just which kinds of land are flooding. Referred to throughout the report as "Adjusted Cleared Land," or ACL, that statistic represents the number of acres of land "suitable for crop production as opposed to woodland, and adjusted to exclude land that is enrolled in any government conservation program" — in other words, actual cropland.

However, in its draft project report, on its web site and in its literature related to the project, the Corps does not signifi-

cantly utilize the real cropland statistic, opting instead for what is apparently a less precise one — "cleared land."

The Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did not respond to repeated requests made by the Deer Creek Pilot to answer a list of questions submitted last week related to information in the MSU study, to provide any clarification of terms, or to comment at all on this story.

However, the Corps' 2000 draft report — which stands as its official statement to the public on the project — maintains repeatedly that 231,000 acres of "cleared land floods on an average annual basis." But "cleared" acres apparently don't equal "adjusted cleared" acres. The MSU report, based on the 1998 Corps figures, and studying virtually the same area, concludes:

- At 85 foot elevation, less than 50,000 acres of real cropland exist;

- At 90 feet, there are less than 100,000 acres of real cropland;

- At 95 feet, there are less than 200,000 acres of real cropland.

Then, based on the maximum amount of cropland flooded in the spring, the MSU professors ranked each flood in the 54-year period:

- Severe (maximum flood stage 96.9 feet) — 8 years;

- Above Average (maximum flood stage 92.2 feet) — 11 years;

- Average (maximum flood

stage 89.5 feet) — 15 years;

- Below Average (maximum flood stage 86.8 feet) — 11 years;

- Mild (maximum flood stage 82.5 feet) — 9 years.

From that, the MSU report concluded that in the "average" year, only 77,433 acres of actual crop land floods (of which 90,000 would still flood even with a pump beginning operation at 87 feet).

Among the other key findings in the MSU report are:

- The Corps' simulation model of the study period with the prescribed pumps in place showed "in the most severe year (1973) the pumps had a relatively large impact on removing floodwaters from inundated ACL, but very large amounts of ACL remained under water on May 1."

- It is slightly over one-half of those years, however, the floodwaters had receded below 81 feet by May 1 without the pumps, and "this percentage did not change with the pumps in operation."

- Delta Council also provided MSU with a list of favored South Delta farmers who were interviewed to obtain "first-hand opinions" for the study. One of those producers, Clifton Porter of Pitar, who serves as co-chairman of the South Delta Flood Control Committee and who has been portrayed in numerous print and television ads as a victim of backwater flooding, is featured in the study as reporting, "most of his cropland in Issaquena County is at an elevation of 95 feet, and is not affected by minor floods."

- The earlier-advanced plan to hold water at an 80-foot elevation during winter months was "ineffective" in most years.

In the sections of the MSU report prepared by Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks personnel, there are warnings that additional studies on the South Delta ecosystem should take place, due to potential consequences of a pumping operation:

- "It is possible that the implementation of a radically different hydrologic regime could influence every plant and animal resource within the area."

- "Flood pulses are natural and fundamentally important to maintaining dynamic, diverse, and productive riverine floodplain ecosystems. Further reduction in the dynamic hydrologies of river floodplain ecosystems may not be wise stewardship."

Sperlock said that he still suspects the findings in his study of the backwater uses and the proposed pumping project. He

admitted he had felt "frustrated" that no final version was ever released but says that he still provides copies of the existing draft upon request.

"Even with the pumps, people (in the South Delta) are going to get some pretty good floods," the MSU professor said. "These things are going to cost an awful lot and they are not going to work like the people think they are."

Despite the fact that it utilized Corps data, no reference is made to the MSU study within

the Vicksburg District's official report on the project, and it is not listed among the research noted as "previous reports and studies that are pertinent to the Yazoo Backwater Project."

What does investigation show?

ROLLING FORK — So what has a weekly newspaper's four-week fact finding mission into the confusing and often contradictory mazes of claims and counter-claims about the Yazoo Backwater Project revealed? What began with questions, some of which may have been answered, still ends with yet more questions.

Mississippi's two United States Senators told their fellow lawmakers earlier this year that the project which has come to be known locally as simply "the pumps," is really about protecting people from flooding in their homes on a regular basis. The Deer Creek Pilot's investigation discovered that's not accurate, at least as far as Sharikey and Issaquena counties are concerned. The Corps of Engineers' report on the project doesn't make such a claim, so from where did the senators get their incorrect information? Perhaps more significantly, why have those involved with the project who know better not chosen to publicly correct it?

At least locally relative to that, The South Delta Flood Control Committee, a creation of the Delta Council and the Mississippi Land Board, would appear to have a black eye in the wake of the investigation.

One of its co-chairmen has admitted that homes here do not flood regularly after years of relating colorful accounts of flooding, while the other co-chairman, who has been recently portrayed as the virtual poster boy for the flood-plagued South Delta farmer, told Mississippi State University professors five years ago that his land doesn't flood.

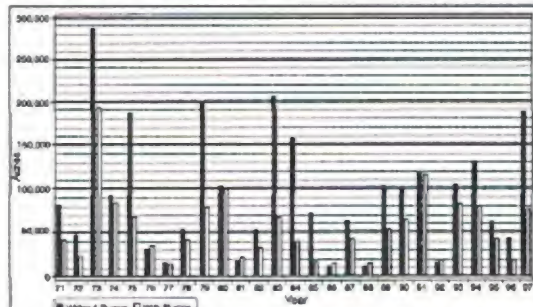
Will there be any fallout from that, or will the South Delta mythology which has grown up surrounding the "pumps" simply expand to include the kinds of tall tales as common to such folklore?

The Yazoo Backwater Project is publicly defended by its proponents against charges that it is primarily an agricultural enhancement one, designed to benefit a handful of large landowners. The newspaper investigation showed that 80 percent of the project benefits calculated by the Corps of Engineers are either directly agricultural or agriculture-related. If 80 percent of the project's benefits are agricultural, how can it not be primarily an agricultural project?

Finally an all new level of significance should now apparently be afforded to the word "adjusted." When applied to the purported number of acres of South Delta land which flood on an average annual basis, the word "adjusted" would appear to have enormous importance to the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. While the Corps has refused to answer any questions or provide any clarification of that subject, it appears that distinction could be the difference between 231,000 "cleared" acres of land flooding every year and 77,000 acres of actual cropland flooding every year.

Does "cleared land" not imply cropland to the average person? When they clearly had both, why would the Corps choose to use the term which is far less accurate and descriptive in its report to the American people, the most affected of whom reside in Sharikey and Issaquena counties? Why would the Corps, which is on the public's payroll, provide the seemingly better data for a study funded by a private organization?

Questions, leading questions, barking yet more questions. But with \$10 million just appropriated by Congress for the project and another \$12 million being requested for next year, who is even looking for their answers?



Source: Constructed from data obtained by MSU from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg District

Estimated maximum adjusted cleared land flooded during the non-winter months, without and with 85-foot elevation pumps at Steele Bayou, Yazoo Backwater Area, 1971-1997